



Rev. Maggi Henderson prepares for worship at Old First Presbyterian Church, San Francisco.

Giving Her All

Rev. Maggi's journey from Piedmont Church Sunday School to San Francisco Clergy

Story and Photos by Michael Barber

Rev. Maggi Henderson was busy working at her desk in her downtown San Francisco church office. Perched several stories from street level, she admits she rarely answers the weekday doorbell - preferring the task be performed by her office administrator.

However, on this day, Maggi took the call. The conversation that began on a tiny intercom would change a young woman's spiritual life forever. More than 50 years earlier, Maggi was a child living with her sister and parents at the corner of Nova and Dale in

Piedmont, California. Her mother drove Maggi to Piedmont Community Church so she could attend Sunday School.

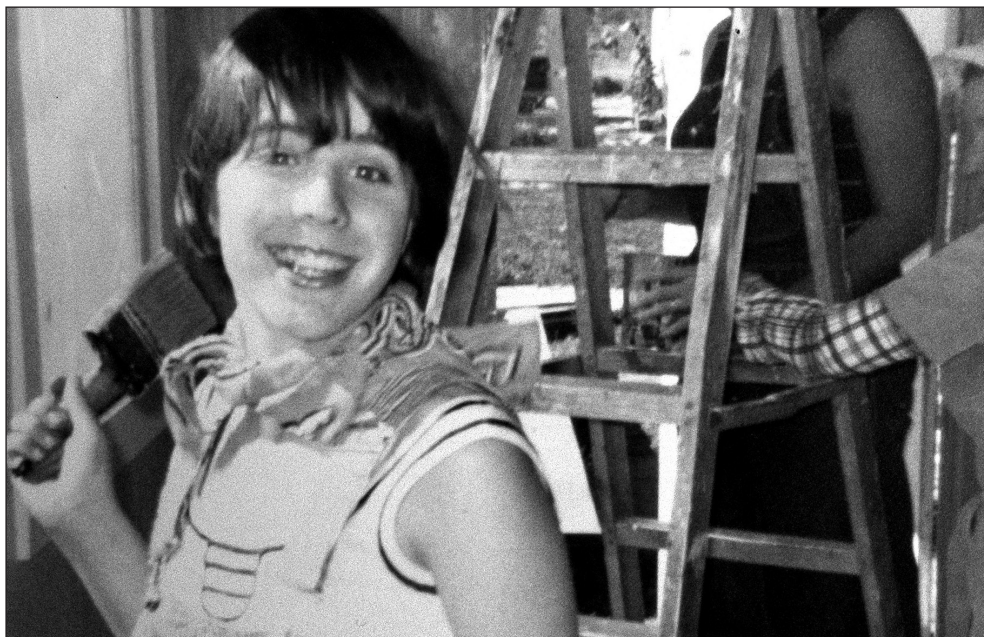
As she matured, Maggi made the weekly trip on foot alone, listening for the church bells to confirm her strides were quick enough to carry her to class on time.

"I just remember I liked Sunday School," Maggi said. "I don't remember specific teachers. I remember the library and the flannel board Bible stories. We went to the children's chapel. We never went to

'big church.' It was part of who I was." "I got offering money of 50 cents," she said, smiling. "I put 25 cents in the offering plate, then spent the rest on candy at a little drug store near the church. Now, I think giving 50% is pretty great."

In middle school, Maggi invited Jan Walker, her friend since kindergarten, to a Sunday evening youth event at Piedmont Church.

"I totally credit Maggi for introducing me to a church where I felt like I



As a teen, Maggi participated in one of the first Piedmont Community Church house-building mission trips to Mexico in the mid-1970s.

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belonged," Jan said. "It became my thing with her and something I enjoyed. When I look back at my spirituality, it began at Piedmont Church with Maggi."

In middle school, Jan thought that Maggi already had what it took to become a pastor.

Maggi felt it, too, suggesting to a visiting female seminary intern that she might also pursue the profession one day.

"It was almost like she had that calling," Jan said. "It was always a part of her life. Some of us struggle with the coolness of religion. With Maggi, it was never a question."

"I'm thankful for Piedmont Church,

"When I look back at my spirituality, it began at Piedmont Church with Maggi."

- Jan Walker

Rev. Maggi's Lifelong Friend

for the spiritual home it gave me, for the welcome on behalf of God from elementary school through middle and high school," Maggi said. "It gave me a refuge to have fun, to begin to understand what it meant to be a beloved child of God, to know that I belong to a community of believers."

While remaining lifelong friends, Maggi and Jan would leave Piedmont after high school graduation. Maggi soon graduated from the University of Oregon.

She earned a Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary and a Master of Christian Education from the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia.

After serving congregations in Austin,



Nearly half of the 140-plus members of Old First Presbyterian Church attend worship each Sunday.

Texas, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and Conyers, Georgia, and enjoying the role of Dean of Students at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, Maggi was called to Old First Presbyterian Church in San Francisco where she has pastored since the fall of 2007.

PIEDMONT CHURCH INFLUENCE

Maggi credits Piedmont Community Church for providing the foundation upon which she built her spiritual life and eventual career as a Pastor.

“Piedmont was a hard place to be if you were an average kid,” Maggi said. “I grew up at a time you could feel the divisions were strong. I often felt ‘less than.’ Youth group gave me a neutral place where people met and differences didn’t hold.”

Rev. Bob Barram, an Associate Pastor who served as Youth Minister at Piedmont Church in the ‘70s, had a significant impact on Maggi during her middle school years. “Bob had the gift of welcome that was stunning,” she said. “He also asked for a deepening of faith that was appropriate for a junior and senior high person. He was kind and made you feel of worth.”

“We felt God loved us and so, we followed Jesus,” Maggi said.

AT THE DOOR

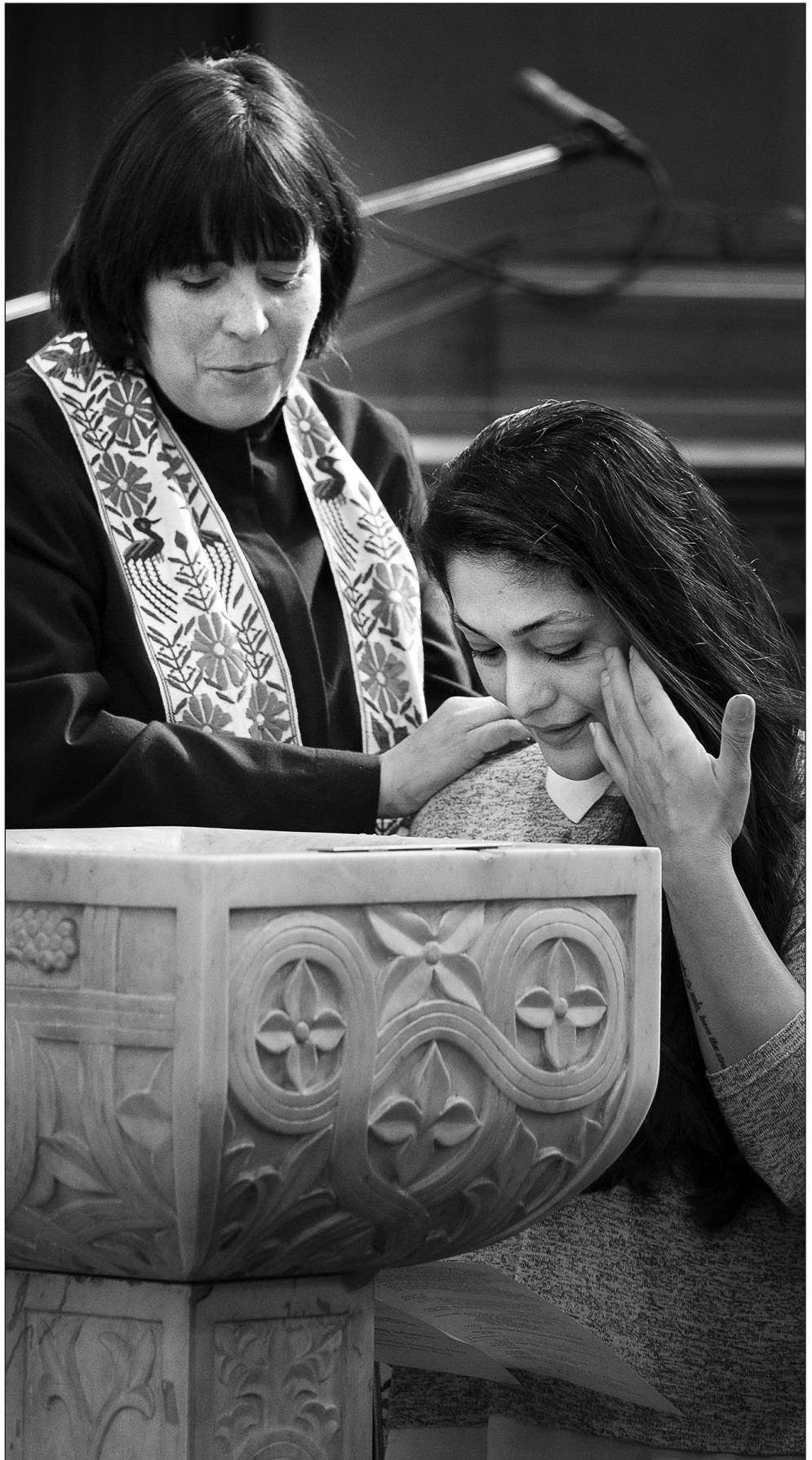
As she opened the church door facing Sacramento Street, Maggi was met by Maryam Behmanesh, a Muslim woman who, until recently, called Iran home.

She wanted to pray.

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“If anyone comes to church in San Francisco it’s a big deal. Anyone walking in makes a statement. Some are longing for peace.”

- Rev. Maggi Henderson



Wiping away tears, new church member Maryam Behmanesh is baptised by Rev. Maggi as part of the January 21 worship service.

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Maryam and Maggi struck up a conversation that convinced Maryam she had finally found her church home.

Months later, on Sunday, January 21, Maggi baptized Maryam in front of the congregation and welcomed her as a member of Old First Presbyterian Church.

"If I start talking about it, it gets me crying," Maryam said. "I chose to come here because of Maggi. The way that she talks with me makes me feel great. I love her in every way. After that, I love the church and the people."

Maryam's weekly journey of faith includes a two-and-a-half hour drive from her home to Old First Church. For Maryam, the trip is worthwhile.

"I've been to many countries and many churches," Maryam said. "I was born Muslim and I cannot convert [to Christianity] in Iran because the government will kill me. I can't say how I feel to be here. It's a great feeling."

Maggi fully appreciates the value of welcoming a new soul into the fold as the business of church in the City by the Bay is not for the faint of heart.

Declining attendance and offerings are often the byproduct of a demographic considered to be 'unchurched,' which is to say those who claim to have no affiliation with a religious institution.

According to survey results released last May by Barna Group, San Francisco is the most unchurched city in the nation, along with Oakland and San Jose, California.

"If anyone comes to church in San Francisco it's a big deal," Maggi said. "Anyone walking in makes a statement. Some are longing for peace. We have 140 members with 70 in attendance. We have to get over the numbers. My question is: are we thriving?"

To answer Maggi's question, one only needs to attend worship at Old First Presbyterian Church.



Established in 1849, Old First Presbyterian Church is the oldest active Protestant congregation in California.

On the Sunday Maryam was baptized, two others joined. The microphone system fizzled out - forcing a 'Plan B' move by an Elder who also sang in the choir, filled the baptismal font with water and snapped iPhone photographs during the new member commissioning.

Meanwhile, a first-time visitor - who spoke little English - asked Maggi for a Bible, while dancers set up to perform in the fellowship hall following the post-worship coffee and danish hour.

"I don't get bored here," Maggi said. "We're a good match." ■



Rev. Maggi greets parishoners at the door following worship. A young man visiting the church, right, waits to receive a copy of the Bible.